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THE WINE-PRESS

ALFRED NOYES

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A TALE OF WAR

Alfred Noyes.

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A TALE OF WAR

BY

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"TALES OF THE MERMAID TAVERN," "SHERWOOD," "DRAKE," ETC.

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DEDICATION

(To those who believe that Peace is the corrupter of nations)

I

PEACE? When have we prayed for peace?
Over us burns a star
Bright, beautiful, red for strife!
Yours are only the drum and the fife
And the golden braid and the surface of life.
Ours is the white-hot war.

II

Peace? When have we prayed for peace?
Ours are the weapons of men.
Time changes the face of the world.
Your swords are rust! Your flags are furled
And ours are the unseen legions hurled
Up to the heights again.

III

Peace? When have we prayed for peace?
Is there no wrong to right?

Wrong crying to God on high
Here where the weak and the helpless die,
And the homeless hordes of the City go by,
The ranks are rallied to-night.

IV

Peace? When have we prayed for peace?
Are ye so dazed with words?
Earth, heaven, shall pass away
Ere for your passionless peace we pray.
Are ye deaf to the trumpets that call us to-day,
Blind to the blazing swords?

PRELUDE

PRELUDE

I

SANDALPHON, whose white wings to heaven up-bear
The weight of human prayer,
Stood silent in the still eternal light
Of God, one dreadful night.
His wings were clogged with blood, and foul with mire,
His body seared with fire.
"Hast thou no word for Me?" the Master said.
The angel sank his head.

II

"Word from the nations of the East and West,"
He moaned, "that blood is best;
The patriot prayers of either half of earth
Hear thou, and judge their worth.
Out of the obscene seas of slaughter, hear
First, the first nation's prayer:
'*O God, deliver Thy people. Let Thy sword*
Destroy our enemies, Lord.'

III

"Pure as the first, as passionate in trust
That their own cause is just,
Puppets as fond in those dark hands of greed,
As fervent in their creed,
As blindly moved, as utterly betrayed,
As urgent for thine aid,
Out of the obscene seas of slaughter, hear
The second nation's prayer:
'*O God, deliver Thy people. Let Thy sword*
Destroy our enemies, Lord.'

IV

"Over their slaughtered children, one great cry
From either enemy;
From either host, thigh-deep in filth and shame,
One prayer, one and the same;
With Thee, with Thee, Lord God of Sabaoth,
It rests to answer both.
Out of the obscene seas of slaughter, hear,
From East and West one prayer:
'*O God, deliver Thy people. Let Thy sword*
Destroy our enemies, Lord.'"

V

Then, on the cross of His creative pain,
God bowed His head again.
Then East and West, over all seas and lands,
Out-stretched His piercèd hands.
Then, down in hell, they chuckled, "West and East,
Each holds one hand, at least . . . ."
"And yet," Sandalphon whispered, "men deny
The eternal Calvary."

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I

A MURDERED man, ten miles away,
  Will hardly shake your peace,
Like one red stain upon your hand;
And a tortured child in a distant land
Will never check one smile to-day,
  Or bid one fiddle cease.

Not for a little news from hell
  Shall London strive or cry.
Tho' thought would shatter like dynamite
These granite hills that bury the right,
We must not think. We must not tell
  The truth for which men die.

To watch the mouth of a harlot foam
  For the blood of Baptist John
Is a fine thing while the fiddles play;
For blood and lust are the mode to-day,
And lust and blood were the mode of Rome,
  And we go where Rome has gone.

The plaudits round the circus roll!
On the old track we swing.
"Unrest," we say, "is in the air";
And a flea is in the lap-dog's chair.
But the unrest that troubles the soul
Is a more difficult thing.

Unrest that has no lot or part
In anything but truth;
Unrest, unrest, whose passions draw
From founts of everlasting law,
Unrest that nerves the out-worn heart,
And calls, like God, to youth;

The truth that tickles no sweet sense,
The pillow of stone by night,
Unrest that no man's art can heal,
Unrest that girds the brain with steel,
And, over earth's indifference,
Like God, calls up the light;

The truth that all might know, but all,
With one consent, refuse;
To call on *that*, to break our pact
Of silence, were to make men *act*.

Good taste forbids that trumpet-call,
And a censor sends our news.

It comes along a little wire
Sunk in a deep sea;
It thins in the clubs to a little smoke
Between one joke and another joke;
For a city in flames is less than the fire
That comforts you and me.

Play up, then, fiddles! Play, bassoon!
The plains are soaked with red.
Ten thousand slaughtered fools, out there,
Clutch at their wounds and taint the air,
And . . . here is an excellent cartoon
On what the Kaiser said.

On with the dance! In England yet
The meadow-grass is green.
Play up, play up, and play your part!
It is not that we lack the heart
But that fate deftly swings the net
And blood is best unseen.

God shields our eyes from too much light,
Clothes the fine brain with clay;
He wraps mankind in swaddling bands
Till the trumpet ring across all lands—
"The time is come to stand upright,
And flood the world with day."

Not yet, O God, not yet the gleam
When all the world shall wake!
Grey and immense comes up the dawn
And yet the blinds are not withdrawn,
And, in the dusk, one hideous dream
Forbids the day to break!

. . . . . .

Around a shining table sat
Five men in black tail-coats;
And, what their sin was, none could say;
For each was honest, after his way,
(Tho' there are sheep, and armament firms,
With all that this "connotes").

One was the friend of a merchant prince,
One was the foe of a priest,
One had a brother whose heart was set
On a gold star and an epaulette,
And—where the rotten carcass lies,
The vultures flock to feast.

But—each was honest after his way,
  Lukewarm in faith, and old;
And blood, to them, was only a word,
And the point of a phrase their only sword,
And the cost of war, they reckoned it
  In little disks of gold.

They were cleanly groomed. They were not
      to be bought.
  And their cigars were good.
But they had pulled so many strings
In the tinselled puppet-show of kings
That, when they talked of war, they thought
  Of sawdust, not of blood;

Not of the crimson tempest
  Where the shattered city falls:
They thought, behind their varnished doors,
Of diplomats, ambassadors,
Budgets, and loans and boundary-lines,
  Coercions and re-calls;

Forces and Balances of Power;
  Shadows and dreams and dust;

And how to set their bond aside
And prove they lied not when they lied,
And which was weak, and which was strong,
  But—never which was just.

Yet they were honest, honest men.
  Justice could take no wrong.
The blind arbitrament of steel,
The mailèd hand, the armoured heel,
Could only prove that Justice reigned
  And that her hands were strong.

For *they* were strong. So might is right,
  And reason wins the day.
And, if at a touch on a silver bell
They plunged three nations into hell,
The blood of peasants is not red
  A hundred miles away.

But, if one touch on a silver bell
  Should loose, beyond control,
A blind immeasurable flood
Of lust and hate and tears and blood,

Unknown immeasurable powers
That swept to an unseen goal,

Beyond their guidance for one hour,
Beyond their utmost ken,
No huddled madman, crowned with straw,
Could so transgress his own last law . . .
So a secretary struck the bell
For these five honest men.

II

With brown arms folded, by his hut, Johann,
The young wood-cutter, waited. A bell tolled,
The sunset fires along the mountain ran,

The bucket at the well dripped a thin gold,
He saw the peaks like clouds of lilac bloom
Above him, then the pine-woods, fold on fold,

Around him, slowly filled with deep blue gloom.
Sleep, *Dodi*, *sleep*, he heard his young wife say,
Hushing their child behind him in the room.

Then, like a cottage casement, far away,
A star thrilled in a pale green space of sky;
And then, like stars, with tiny ray on ray,

He saw the homely village-lights reply:
And earth and sky were mingled in one night,
And all that vast dissolving pageantry

Drew to those quintessential points of light,
Still as the windless candles in a shrine,
Significant in the depth as in the height.

O, little blue pigeon, sleep. Sleep, Dodi mine,
She murmured. *Sleep, little rose in your rosy bed.*
The moon is rocking, rocking to rest in the pine.

Sleep, little blue pigeon,
Sleep on my breast,
Sleep, while the stars shine,
Sleep, while the big pine
Rocks with the white moon,
Over your nest.

A great grey cloud sailed slowly overhead.
She stood behind Johann. Around his eyes
Her soft hands closed. "Dodi's asleep," she said.

He drew her hands away. Then, as the skies
Darkened, he muttered, "Sonia, you must know.
I've kept the news from you all day."

Surprise
Parted her lips.
"To-morrow I must go."——
"Go? Where?"——Clear as a silver bell, one star
Thrilled thro' the clouds. Her face looked white as snow.

——"To-morrow morning, Sonia. No, not far!
To join the regiment. We are called, you see."—
"But why? What does it mean?"——
"Mean, Sonia? War!"

III

The troop-train couplings clanged like Fate
  Above the bugles' din.
Sweating beneath their haversacks,
With rifles bristling on their backs,
Like heavy-footed oxen
  The dusty men trooped in.

It seemed that some gigantic hand
  Behind the veils of sky
Was driving, herding all these men
Like cattle into a cattle-pen,
So few of them could understand,
  So many of them must die.

Johann was crammed into his truck.
  Far off, he heard a shout.
The corporal cracked a bottle of wine,
And passed the drink along the line.
The iron couplings clanged again,
  And the troop-train rumbled out.

"I left my wife a month's pay,"
  A voice droned at his side.

"This war, they say, will last a year.
God knows what will become of her,
With three to feed."—"Ah, that's the way
In war," Johann replied.

"They say that war's a noble thing!
They say it's good to die,
For causes none can understand!
They say it's for the Fatherland!
They say it's for the Flag, the King,
And none must question why!"

The train shrieked into a tunnel.
"Duty?—Yes, that is good.
But when the thing has grown so vast
That no man knows, from first to last,
The reason why he finds himself
Up to his neck in blood;

"When you are trapped and carried along
By a Power that runs on rails;
Why, open that door, my friends, and see
The way you are fixed. You think you are
free,

But the iron wheels are singing a song
That stuns our fairy-tales;

"When you are lifted up like this
Between a finger and thumb,
And dropt you don't know where or why,
And told to shoot and butcher and die,
And not to question, not to reply,
But go like a sheep to the shearers,
A lamb to the slaughter, dumb;

"What? Are the engines, then, our God?
Does one amongst you know
The *reason* of this bitter work?"—
"Reason? The devilry of the Turk!
Lock, stock, and barrel, the Sick Man
And all his tribe must go."

"England, they say, is on our side,"
Another voice began.
"The paper says it."—"But, I thought . . .
Does no one know why England fought

The great Crimean war, my friends,
Where blood so freely ran?"—

"O, ay! They say that England backed
The wrong horse, a sheer blunder!
She poured out blood *to guarantee,*
For all time, the integrity
Of European Islam."—"Ah!"—
The train rolled on like thunder.

Michael, the poet, a half Greek,
Listened to what they said.
Twice his lips parted as to speak,
And twice he sank his head,
Then a great fire burned in his eyes,
His shallow cheek flushed red.

"Comrades, comrades, you know not
The banners that you bear!
There is a sword upon our side,
A sword that is a song," he cried;
Then, through the song, as he whispered it,
His heart poured like a prayer:

I

"Whose face, whose on high,
Lifts thro' the sky
That aureole?
Who, over earth and sea,
Cries *Victory?*
Europe, thy soul
Comes home to thee.

II

"Is it a dream, a cloud
That thus hath rent the shroud
To speak, sublime and proud,
Thy faith aloud;
Whose eyes make young and fair
All things in earth and air;
The shadow of whose white wing
Makes violets spring?

III

"Is it the angel of day,
Whom the blind pray
Still that their faith

Soundly sleep by night?
Blood-red, yet white,
Re-risen, she saith
Let there be Light!

IV

"Whose are the conquering eyes
That burn thro' those dark skies?
Whose is the voice that cries
Awake, arise?
For, if she speak one word
To sheathe or draw the sword,
Her nations, on that day,
Answer her, *Yea!*

V

"It is the angel of God,
Sun-crowned, fire-shod,
Bidding hate cease.
Her proud voice on high
Bids darkness die.
Her name is Greece,
Or Liberty.

"*Comrades,*" he cried, "*you know not*
The splendour of your blades!
This war is not as other wars:
The night shrinks with all her stars,
And Freedom rides before you
On the last of the Crusades.

"*She rides a snow-white charger*
Tho' her flanks drip with red,
Before her blade's white levin
The Crescent pales in heaven,
Nor shall she shrink from battle
Till the sun reign overhead;

Till the dead Cross break in blossom;
Till the God we sacrificed,
With that same love He gave us,
Stretch out His arms to save us,
Yea, till God save the People,
And heal the wounds of Christ."

IV

They crept across the valley
Where the wheat was turning brown.

There was no cloud in the blue sky,
No sight, no sound of an enemy,
When the sharp command rang over them,
Cover! and *Lie down!*

Johann, with four beside him,
In a cottage garden lay.
Peering over a little wall,
They heard a bird in the eaves call:
And, through the door, a clock ticked,
A thousand miles away.

A thousand miles, a thousand years,
And all so still and fair,
Then, like some huge invisible train,
Splitting the blue heavens in twain,
Out of the quiet distance rushed
A thunder of shrieking air.

The earth shook below them,
And lightnings lashed the sky,
The trees danced in the fires of hell,
The walls burst like a bursting shell;
And a bloody mouth gnawed at the stones
Like a rat, with a thin cry.

Then, all across the valley,
Deep silence reigned anew:
There was no cloud in the blue sky,
No sight, no sound of an enemy
But the red, wet shape beside Johann,
And that lay silent, too.

A bugle like a scourge of brass
Whipped thro' nerve and brain;
Up from their iron-furrowed beds
The long lines with bowed heads
Plunged to meet the hidden Death
Across the naked plain.

They leapt across the lewd flesh
That twisted at their feet;
They leapt across wild shapes that lay
Stark, besmeared with blood and clay
Like the great dead birds, with the glazed eyes,
That the farmer hangs in the wheat.

Johann plunged onward, counting them,
Scarecrows that once were men.

He counted them by twos, by fours,
Then, all at once, by tens, by scores!
Cover! Thro' flesh and nerve and bone
The bugles rang again.

They lay upon the naked earth,
Each in his place.
There was no cloud in the blue sky,
No sight, no sound of an enemy.
A brown bee murmured near Johann,
And the sweat streamed down his face;

The quiet hills that they must storm
Slept softly overhead,
When, in among their sun-lit trees
A sound as of gigantic bees
Whirred, and all the plains were ripped
With leaping streaks of lead.

The lightnings leapt among the lines
Like a mountain-stream in flood.
Scattering the red clay they ran
A river of fire around Johann,
And, thrice, a spatter of human flesh
Blinded him with blood.

Then all the hills grew quiet
And the sun slept on the field,
There was no cloud in the blue sky,
No sight, no sound of an enemy;
But, over them, like a scourge of brass
The scornful bugles pealed.

Forward! At the double,
Not questioning what it means!
The long rows of young men
Carried their quivering flesh again
Over those wide inhuman zones
Against the cold machines.

Flesh against things fleshless,
Never the soul's desire,
Never the flash of steel on steel,
But the brain that is mangled under the wheel,
The nerves that shrivel, the limbs that reel
Against a sheet of fire.

They reeled against the thunder.
Their captain at their head:

They reeled, they clutched at the air, they fell!
Halt! Rapid fire! The bugles' yell
Rang along the swaying ranks,
And they crouched behind their dead.

The levelled rifles cracked like whips
Against the dark hill brow:
And, for a peasant as for a king,
A dead man makes good covering;
Or, if the man be breathing yet,
There is none to save him now.

Across a heap of flesh, Johann
Fired at the unseen mark.
He had not fired a dozen rounds
When the shuddering lump of tattered wounds
Lifted up a mangled head
And whined, like a child, in the dark.

Its eyes were out. The raw strings
Along its face lay red;
It caught the barrel in its hands
And set it to its head.

Its jaw dropped dumbly, but Johann
  Saw and understood:
The rifle flashed, and the dead man
  Lay quiet in his blood.

Then all along the reeking hills
  And up the dark ravines,
The long rows of young men
Leapt in the glory of life again
To carry their warm and breathing breasts
  Against the cold machines;

Against the Death that mowed them down
  With a cold indifferent hand;
And every gap at once was fed
With more life from the fountain-head,
Filled up from endless ranks behind
  In the name of the Fatherland.

Mown down! Mown down! Mown
      down! Mown down!
  They staggered in sheets of fire,

They reeled like ships in a sudden blast,
And shreds of flesh went spattering past,
And the hoarse bugles laughed on high,
  Like fiends from hell—*Retire!*

The tall young men, the tall young men,
  That were so fain to die,
It was not theirs to question,
  It was not theirs to reply.

They had broken their hearts on the
      cold machines;
  And—they had not seen their foe;
And the reason of this butcher's work
  It was not theirs to know;
For these tall young men were children
  Five short years ago.

Headlong, headlong, down the hill,
  They leapt across their dead.
Like madmen, wrapt in sheets of flame,
Yelling out of their hell they came,
And, in among their plunging hordes,
  The shrapnel burst and spread.

The shrapnel severed the leaping limbs
  And shrieked above their flight.
They rolled and plunged and writhed like snakes
In the red hill-brooks and the blackthorn brakes.
Their mangled bodies tumbled like elves
  In a wild Walpurgis night.

Slaughter! Slaughter! Slaughter!
  The cold machines whirred on.
And strange things crawled amongst the wheat
With entrails dragging round their feet,
And over the foul red shambles
  A fearful sunlight shone.

And a remnant reached the trenches
  Where the black-mouthed guns lay still.
There was no cloud in the blue sky,
No sight, no sound of an enemy.
The sunlight slept on the valley,
  And the dead slept on the hill.

. . . . . .

But now, beyond the hill, there rose
  A dull and sullen roar,

A sound as of distant breakers
That burst on a granite shore.
Nearer it boomed and nearer,
A muffled doomsday din,
A thunder as of assaulting seas
When the tides are rolling in.

A corporal leapt along the trench
And shook his blade;
"God sends the Greeks up from the South
In good time to our aid!

"The Turkish dogs are in the trap
Between us! God is good!
They are driving them over the ridge of the hill
For our guns, our guns to work their will.
Children of Marko, you shall lap
Your bellyful of blood."

Down, the dark clouds of Islam poured
Over the ragged height:
Down, into the valley of wheat,
And the warm dead that lay at their feet,

The men they had slaughtered, slaughtered, slaughtered,
Grinned up at their flight.

Behind, the conquering thunders rolled
Along the abandoned hill.
Onward the scattering squadrons came
Like madmen, wrapt in a sheet of flame,
Straight for the lurking trenches,
Where the black-mouthed guns lay still.

And through the masked artillery ran
A whimper of straining hounds.
"Not yet," the order passed; "lie still,
Lie still, and lick your wounds."

Johann lay quivering, in a line
That whined like a leashed wolf-pack,
Leashed by a whisper, sharp as a sword,
At the white of their eyes, I give the word,
Then let the sun be turned to blood,
And the face of God grow black.

Up, up, like plunging bullocks
  The dark-faced Moslems came.
Johann could see their wild eyes shine,
An order hissed along the line,
The black earth yawned like a crimson mouth,
And *slaughter*, *slaughter*, *slaughter*, *slaughter*,
  The trenches belched their flame.

The maxims cracked like cattle-whips
  Above the struggling hordes.
They rolled and plunged and writhed like snakes
In the trampled wheat and the blackthorn brakes,
And the lightnings leapt among them
  Like clashing crimson swords.

The rifles flogged their wallowing herds,
  Flogged them down to die.
Down on their slain the slayers lay,
And the shrapnel thrashed them into the clay,
And tossed their limbs like tattered birds
  Thro' a red volcanic sky.

Then, hard behind the thunder, swept
  Long ranks of arrowy gleams;

Out of the trenches, down the hill
The level bayonets charged to kill,
And the massed terror that took the shock
  Screamed as a woman screams.

Before Johann a young face rose
  Like a remembered prayer;
He could not halt or swerve aside
In the onrush of that murderous tide,
He jerked his bayonet out of the body
  And swung his butt in the air.

He yelled like a wolf to drown the cry
  Of his own soul in pain.
To stifle the God in his own breast,
He yelled and cursed and struck with the rest,
And the blood bubbled over his boots
  And greased his hands again.

Faces like drowned things underfoot
  Slipped as he swung round:
A red mouth crackled beneath his boot
  Like thorns in spongy ground.

Slaughter? Slaughter? So easy it seemed,
This work that he thought so hard!
His eyes lit with a flicker of hell,
He licked his lips, and it tasted well;
And—once—he had sickened to watch them slaughter
An ox in the cattle-yard.

For lust of blood, for lust of blood,
His greasy bludgeon swung:
His rifle-butt sang in the air,
And the things that crashed beneath it there
Were a cluster of grapes in the wine-press,
A savour of wine on his tongue.

Till now the allies' bloody hands
Across the work could join;
And, as Johann stretched out his own,
A man that was cleft to the white breast-bone
Writhed up between his knees and fired
A bullet into his groin.

He clutched at the wound. He groaned. He fell
On the warm breasts of the slain.

Yet, as he swooned, he dreamed he heard
From the lips of Greece one thunder-word,
Freedom!—dreamed that the sons of the mountain
Doubled the shout again;

Dreamed—for surely this was a dream—
He saw them, red from the fight,
Embraced and sobbing, "God is good,
And the blood that seals our brotherhood
Is the red of the dawn that breaks upon Europe."
Over him swept the night.

V

Michael had brought a message home. He came,
Groping, with blind pits where his eyes had been,
And a face glorious with an inner flame,

Whiter than death, and proud with things unseen.
He came to Sonia; and she stood there, wan,
Watching him, wondering what such pride might mean

A long low flame along the mountains ran.
He spoke to the air beyond her.

"*Sonia*," he said,
"*It was your birthday when I left Johann*

In the field-hospital. Since you were wed,
The first, perhaps, without some fond word spoken,
Some gift. And so he sent this disk of lead
Which came out of his wound. Wear it in token
That lovers cannot meet, nor freemen rest,
Until the chains of tyranny be broken.

Tell her," he said—blood washed the golden west—
"*My wound is healing fast.*" With fumbling hand
Michael drew out the bullet from his breast.

She took and kissed it.

"Ah, but this war is grand!"
The blind man murmured. "Blessed are they
that see
The beautiful angel of our Fatherland,

"The glory of the angel of Liberty
Walking thro' all those teeming tents of pain,
The tattered hospitals of our agony,

"Where broken men gaze into her eyes again,
Like happy children. Sonia, I am told
That wounds broke open for joy, tears flowed
like rain

"When word came that the Allies would soon
hold
Byzantium, and the mosque that in old days
Belonged to Christ.
There, glimmering like pale gold,

"High on the walls, they say, thro' a worn haze
Of whitewash, His crowned Face till time shall cease
Looks down in pity on all our tangled ways,

"And yearns to guide us into the way of peace.
Would God I might be with them, when they ride,
Those hosts of Christ, the Balkan States and Greece,

"Along the Golden Horn!"
The sunset died.
Yet his blind face grew glorious with light,
And, like a soul in ecstasy, he cried:

"The Prophet is fallen! His kingdom is rent asunder!
The blood-stained steeds move on with a sound of thunder!
The sword of the Prophet is broken. His cannon are dumb.
The last Crusade rides into Byzantium!

"See — on the walls that enshrined the high faith of our fathers—
Rich as the dawn thro' the mist that on Bosphorus gathers,
Gleam the mosaics, the rich encrustations of old,
Crimson on emerald, azure and opal on gold.

"Faint thro' that mist, lo, the Light of the World, the forsaken
Glory of Christ, while with terror the mountains are shaken,
Silently waits; and the skies with wild trumpets are torn;
Waits, and the rivers run red to the Golden Horn;

"Waits, like the splendour of Truth on the walls of Creation;
Waits, with the Beauty, the Passion, the high Consecration,
Hidden away on the walls of the world, in a cloud,
Till the Veil be rent, and the Judgment proclaim Him aloud.

"Ah, the deep eyes, San Sofia, that deepen and glisten;
Ah, the crowned Face o'er thine altars, the King that must listen,
Listen and wait thro' the ages, listen and wait,
For the tramp of a terrible host, and a shout in the gate!

"Conquerors, what is your sign, as ye ride thro' the City?
Is it the sword of wrath, or the sheath of pity?
Nay, but a Sword Reversed, let your hilts on high
Lift the sign of your Captain against the sky!

"Reverse the Sword! The Crescent is rent asunder!
Lift up the Hilt! Ride on with a sound of thunder!
Lift up the Cross! The cannon, the cannon are dumb.
The last Crusade rides into Byzantium!"

Under the apple-tree a shadow stirred.
An old grey peasant stood there in the night.
"*Michael*," he said, "*this is bad news we've heard!*"

"*Bad news?*"—"*O, ay, we're in a pretty plight!*
They've quarrelled!"—"*Who?*"—"*Your great*
Crusading band,
Greece, and the Balkan States. They're going to
fight!"

—"*Fight? Fight? For what?*"—"*Why, don't you*
understand
What war is? For a port to export prunes,
For Christ, my boy, and for the Fatherland!"

VI

Johann had left the tents of death
And the moan of shattered men.
By God's own grace he was fit to face
The cold machines again.

It was not his to understand,
  It was only his to know
His hand was against the comrade's hand
  He clasped, a month ago.

It was not his to question,
  It was not his to reply;
But, over him, the night grew black;
And his own troop was falling back,
Falling back before the flag
  He had helped to raise on high.

And the guns, the guns that drove them,
  Had thundered with his own!
The men he must kill for a little pay
Had marched beside him, yesterday!
Brothers in blood! By what foul lips
  Was this war-trumpet blown?

Back from the heights they had stormed together,
  The gulfs that had gorged their dead,
Back, by the rotting, shot-ripped plain,
Where the black wings fluttered and perched again,
And the yellow beaks in the darkness
  Ripped and dripped and fed.

And once they stayed for water
  By a deep marble well,
Under the walls of a shattered town
They dropt a guttering pine-torch down,
And caught one glimpse of a wine-press
  Choked with the fruits of hell;

One glimpse of the women and children,
  A tangle of red and white!
The naked fruitage hissed in the glare:
They caught the smell of the singeing hair,
And the torch was out, and the wine-press
  Black as the covering night.

And fear went with them down the roads
  Where they had marched in pride;
And villages in panic rout
Poured their rumbling ox-carts out,
And women dropped beneath their loads
  And sobbed by the wayside.

VII

Once, as with bleeding feet they shambled along,
  They came on a wayside fire, a ring of light,

Where old men, women and children, a motley
throng,

And their white oxen, heavy with day-long flight,
Crouched and couched together, on the cold
ground,
In a wild blaze of beauty that gashed the night,

Gashed and tattered the gloom like a blood-red
wound.
Now on a blue or an orange sheepskin cloak
It splashed, and now on the wagons that
shadowed them round.

But the great black eyes of the oxen, forgetting
the yoke,
Shone with a sheltering pity, so meek, so mild,
While the women lay resting against them; and
the smoke

Rolled with the cloud; and Johann, with a heart
running wild,
Saw one pale woman that sat in the midst of
them,

With a dark-blue robe wrapped round her,
suckling a child.
And he thought of the child and the oxen of
Bethlehem.

VIII

Back, they fell back before the guns,
Till on one last dark night
They lay along a mountain-ridge
Entrenched for their last fight.
A pine-wood rolled below them,
And the moon was all their light.

Johann looked down, in a wild dream,
On that remembered place:
O, like a ghost, he saw once more
The path that led to his own door,
A white thread, winding thro' the pines,
And the tears ran down his face.

A ghost on guard among the dead
With a heart running wild,
For the light of a little window-pane

And all the sorrow of earth again,
A crust of bread, a head on his breast,
And the cry of his own child;

The cup of cold water
That Love would change to wine . . .
Sonia! Dodi! O, to creep back! . . .
There was a cry in the woods, the crack
Of a pistol, and a startled shout,
Halt! Give the countersign!

Then all the black unguarded woods
Behind them spat red flame.
A thousand rifles shattered the night;
And, after the lightning, up the height,
A thousand steady shafts of light,
The moonlit bayonets came.

Hurled to the trench by the storm of steel
Under a heap of the slain,
Like one quick nerve in that welter of death,
Johann quivered, blood choked his breath,
And the charge broke over him like a sea,
And passed like a hurricane.

He crept out in the ghastly moon
By a black tarpaulined gun.
He stood alone on the moaning height
While the bayonets flashed behind the flight,
"*Sonia! Dodi!*" . . . He turned. He broke
For the path, with a stumbling run.

Down by the little white moon-lit thread,
He rushed thro' the ghostly wood,
A living man in a world of the dead,
To the place where his own home stood.

For War had "trained" him, strengthened his heart
To bear that glory again:
And he was "fitted" to play his part
At last, in a "world of men."

The embers of his hut still burned;
And, in the deep blue gloom,
His bursting eyeballs yet could see
A white shape under the apple-tree,

A naked body, dabbled with red,
Like a drift of apple-bloom.

She lay like a broken sacrament
That the dogs have defiled,
"*Sonia! Sonia! Speak to me!*"
He babbled like a child.

The child, the child that lay on her knees. . . .
Devil nor man may name
The things that Europe must not print,
But only whisper and chuckle and hint,
Lest the soul of Europe rise in thunder
And swords melt in the flame.

She bore the stigmata of sins
That devil nor man may tell;
For O, good taste, good taste, good taste,
Constrains and serves us well;
And the censored truth that dies on earth
Is the crown of the lords of hell.

The quiet moon sailed slowly out
From a grey cloud overhead,
When, out of the gnarled old apple-tree
There came a moan and, heavily
A patter of blood fell, gout by gout
On the white breast of the dead.

There came a moan from the apple-tree,
And the moon showed him there,—
The blind man with his arms stretched wide,
And a nail thro' his hand on either side,
A nail thro' the naked palms of his feet
And a crown of thorns in his hair.

Johann knelt down before him,
"*O brother, O Son of Man,*
It was not ours to doubt or reply
When the people were led out to die,
This, this is the end of our Liberty,
And the goal for which we ran.

"O, Christ of the little children. . . ."
Over his naked blade
Johann bowed, bowed and fell,
Gasping, *"Sonia, Dodi, tell*
Your God in heaven, I grow so weary
Of all that He has made."

Then, still as frost across the world
The tender moonlight spread,
And, one by one, from the apple-tree
The drops of blood fell heavily,
And the blind man that was crucified
Spake softly, to the dead.

"Conquered, we shall conquer!
They have not hurt the soul.
For there is another Captain
Whose legions round us roll,
Battling across the wastes of Death
Till all be healed and whole.

"Till, members of one Body,
Our agony shall cease;

Till, like a song thro' chaos,
His marching worlds increase;
Till the souls that sit in darkness
Behold the Prince of Peace;

"Till the dead Cross break in blossom;
Till the God we sacrificed,
With that same love He gave us,
Stretch out His arms to save us,
Yea, till God save the People,
And heal the wounds of Christ."

EPILOGUE

THE DAWN OF PEACE

Yes——"on our brows we feel the breath
  Of dawn," though in the night we wait!
An arrow is in the heart of Death,
  A God is at the doors of Fate!
The Spirit that moved upon the Deep
  Is moving through the minds of men:
The nations feel it in their sleep.
  A change has touched their dreams again.

Voices, confused and faint, arise,
  Troubling their hearts from East and West.
A doubtful light is in their skies,
  A gleam that will not let them rest:
The dawn, the dawn is on the wing,
  The stir of change on every side,
Unsignalled as the approach of Spring,
  Invincible as the hawthorn-tide.

Have ye not heard, tho' darkness reigns,
A People's voice across the gloom,
A distant thunder of rending chains,
And nations rising from their tomb,
Then—if ye will—uplift your word
Of cynic wisdom, till night fail,
Tell us He came to bring a sword,
Spit poison in the Holy Grail.

Say that we dream! Our dreams have woven
Truths that out-face the burning sun:
The lightnings, that we dreamed, have cloven
Time, space, and linked all lands in one!
Dreams! But their swift celestial fingers
Have knit the world with threads of steel,
Till no remotest island lingers
Outside the world's great Commonweal.

Tell us that custom, sloth, and fear
Are strong, then name them "common sense"!
Tell us that greed rules everywhere,
Then dub the lie "experience":
Year after year, age after age,
Has handed down, thro' fool and child,
For earth's divinest heritage
The dreams whereon old wisdom smiled.

Dreams are they? But ye cannot stay them,
Or thrust the dawn back for one hour!
Truth, Love, and Justice, if ye slay them,
Return with more than earthly power:
Strive, if ye will, to seal the fountains
That send the Spring thro' leaf and spray:
Drive back the sun from the Eastern mountains,
Then—bid this mightier movement stay.

It is the Dawn! The Dawn! The nations
From East to West have heard a cry,——
Though all earth's blood-red generations
By hate and slaughter climbed thus high,
Here—on this height—still to aspire,
One only path remains untrod,
One path of love and peace climbs higher.
Make straight that highway for our God.

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